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Soviet weapons for Sandinistas spotted in Cuba

By Roger Fontaine
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Soviet and Bulgarian freighters at the Cuban port of Mariel have been transferring large amounts of heavy war materiel to Nicaraguan coastal freighters for delivery to the Sandinista government, administration sources told The Washington Times.

The operation was confirmed by a U.S. SR-71 Blackbird reconnaissance plane that flew over Cuba Thursday night.

Reagan administration officials have had evidence for several weeks that the Soviets were supplying Nicaragua in this indirect manner, but the SR-71 photos have now confirmed it, these officials said.

U.S. intelligence had been frustrated until late last week in obtaining hard evidence of the new procedure owing to heavy cloud cover over the island associated with a nearly stationary Hurricane Juan.

The supplies of Soviet equipment are not being delivered directly to Nicaraguan ports, but are being transferred to two small Nicaraguan coastal freighters at Mariel, Cuba. The freighters then proceed to Nicaragua's Caribbean port, El Bluff, and then go up the Escondido River to Rama where the materiel is unloaded and dispersed by road to military bases around the country, according to administration officials.

It is the first time, according to the sources, that this form of deception has been carried out by the Soviet Union.

Officials speculated that the new arrangement is designed to call less attention to the Soviet role in Nicaragua at a delicate time prior to the

U.S.-Soviet summit in Geneva. Officials also recalled that the last heavy Soviet shipments that went directly to the Nicaraguan Pacific port of Corinto in November 1984 came too close to crossing "the threshold," in the words of one official, and that Moscow was unwilling to cross it at this time.

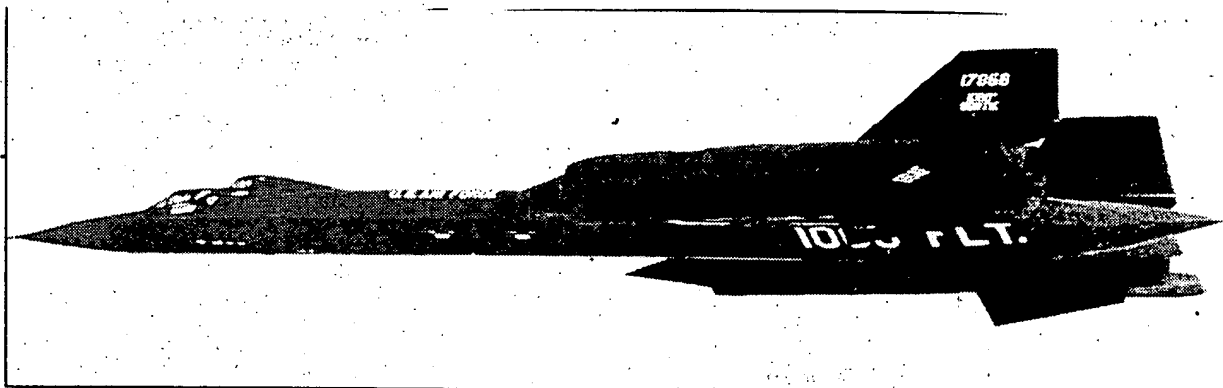
The photographs, which are now being studied closely, indicate that the Soviets may be supplying substantial amounts of arms including tanks, artillery, and possibly planes to strengthen the Sandinista regime's drive against Nicaraguan resistance forces.

One administration official told The Times that there have been at least three or four dozen T-54/55 tanks in Mariel awaiting shipment to Nicaragua. But other administration sources cautioned that much of the materiel still is in crates and a final assessment of what they contain is still pending.

The first official told The Times that the shipment of the new tanks would be a substantial addition to Nicaragua's already formidable armored forces, the largest in Central America. He said the tanks are right off Soviet production assembly lines that were reopened in 1979 to supply Third World clients such as Nicaragua with a highly capable tank.

The Sandinista offensive against the resistance coincides with a crackdown on the unarmed opposition as well, part of Managua's campaign to destroy the anti-Sandinista forces by the end of the year.

The U.S. Air Force spy plane en-
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This is a U.S. SR-71, a Blackbird reconnaissance plane such as the one which flew over Cuba Thursday, finding weapons are being transhipped from the Soviet Union to Nicaragua via Cuba, according to administration sources. UPI

CUBA

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tered Cuban airspace Thursday night and made two sweeps of the island in little less than an hour.

The supersonic craft with highly sophisticated cameras was fired on by Soviet-made SAM missiles, according to these same sources, but the plane returned to its U.S. base unharmed.

Intercepts of conversations of Cuban anti-aircraft units monitored by U.S. intelligence showed both surprise and frustration at the SR-71's capabilities at speed and evasion.

That frustration as well as the intelligence obtained, these sources suggested, may account for the angry Cuban reaction to the flight.

Besides the usual strong protest to Washington, Cuban authorities ordered 20,000 demonstrators to appear before the U.S. Interests Section of the Swiss embassy in Havana to protest the flight — the first such demonstration since the Mariel boatlift crisis of 1980, and the first ever against U.S. reconnaissance flights, which have been carried out regularly since the beginning of the Reagan administration.

U.S. officials in Washington on Friday said the protest was peaceful, but declined further comment on the first report of the flight, made by the official Cuban news agency, Prensa Latina, saying they were not authorized to confirm or deny alleged intelligence operations.

The Castro government filed a complaint with the United States

Thursday night immediately after the flights were detected, according to a Prensa Latina dispatch monitored in Mexico City.

According to Prensa Latina, the SR-71 entered Cuban airspace at 9:58 p.m. Thursday over San Antonio in the province of Pinar del Rio.

The Cuban news agency said the plane flew over the island and left Cuban airspace at 10:25 p.m., only to return 15 minutes later for another run over the island nation.

The craft left Cuban airspace at 10:53 p.m., about 20 miles northwest of Havana, and headed toward the United States, the news agency said.

Prensa Latina said the same type of plane flew over Cuba on Aug. 8 and that the Castro government had also filed a complaint about the incident.

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